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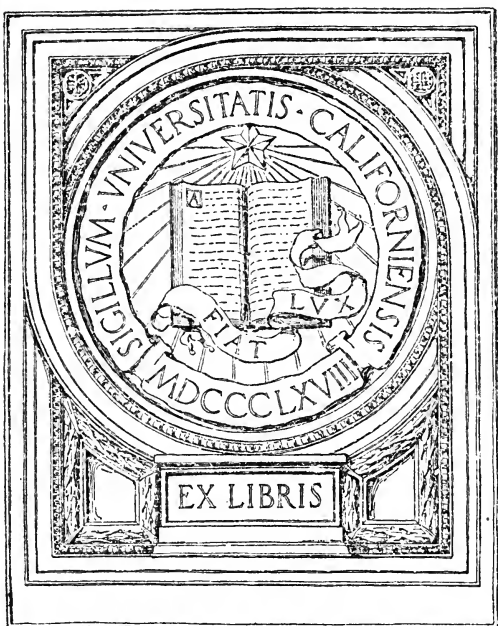
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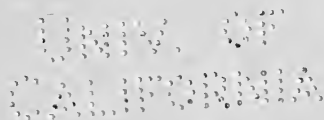
Conservative and Unionist Women's
Franchise Association.

The Progress of the
Women's Suffrage Movement

by

Mrs. Henry Sidgwick

Presidential Address to the Cambridge Branch of
the C. & U. W. F. A. at the Annual Meeting on
May 23rd, 1913.



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THE PROGRESS OF THE WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT.

*An address to the Cambridge Branch of the Conservative and
Unionist Women's Suffrage Association at their Annual
Meeting on May 23, 1913. By Mrs. Henry Sidgwick.*

It seems to me sometimes that we do not cheer ourselves as much as we might by thinking of the immense strides our movement has made in the last fifty years ; so I propose to say a few words about it this afternoon, although there is not of course anything very new to say. For we need cheering because, notwithstanding the general progress of our cause, we are just now suffering from a serious set-back due to the action of the militant societies. They are clearly and visibly setting people against us. And it appears that not only in this country are they raising up enemies against us, but that *our* militants are hindering the movement in other countries.

Moreover, what is much worse than injury to the special cause which our society exists to promote, the militants are injuring our country and the cause of civilization and progress. The very existence and usefulness of society depends on the maintenance of law and order. The protection of the weak, the possibility of development in well being generally, all that society stands for, depends on its members being law abiding—on their respecting law and life and property. And here we have women, while urging that their admission to a formal share in the government of the country would be for its advantage, at the same time teaching by the most powerful method they can use,—namely, example—doctrines subversive of all social order ; teaching that persons who cannot get the majority to agree with their view of what is advisable in the interest of the whole should injure and annoy the community in every way they conveniently can—proceeding even to incendiarism, and apparently threatening manslaughter.

It is heartbreaking that such things should be done in a good cause—and it is especially hard for women to bear because it hurts their pride in their own sex. They have to see not only their country injured, and the cause of women's suffrage, in whose name these things are done, retarded, but they have to see the reputation of their sex for good sense and sober judgment dragged in the mud.

This is the most serious—indeed, I think the only serious set-back our movement has had. It has on the whole been sufficiently wisely conducted to secure almost uniformly steady progress from its small beginnings to its present great proportions.

In all—or almost all—big social movements ultimate success depends on the gradual conversion to benevolence of a large neutral majority. The movement in its beginning—and this was eminently true of our movement—is championed by a small body of pioneers. They make converts, and when they begin to be taken seriously a body of active opponents is probably stirred up, but so long as the active opposition is not too strong it does little harm—it may even do good by helping to interest people in the question. But for a long time the great mass of people remain neutral. Either they have never heard of the movement, or they do not think it serious and only laugh at it, or they think the question unimportant and do not much mind which way it is decided, or they think immediate decision is not called for, and that they may as well wait and see. In fact, for one reason or another they do not think very much about it, and are not actively interested on either side.

Of course if such people are led to declare themselves prematurely, the natural caution and conservatism of human nature will usually make them vote against change. It is largely for this reason that good judgment—a sound political instinct as to what it is wise to press at any given moment—is required in the leaders of a movement. And though it is no doubt very important to draw active converts from the large neutral class, it is still more important to prevent the enemy doing so. For it is not necessary to convert the

great majority into active supporters. Success is finally achieved when a sufficient proportion of the originally indifferent have arrived at a more or less benevolent neutrality almost without knowing it—so that the old indifferents come to believe that they always thought there was a great deal to be said for the proposed change, and the young indifferents grow up with a feeling that it has to come.

This change of feeling does not for the most part come from the *direct* influence of active propaganda. It is part of the general change in the social atmosphere, and comes from the pressure of circumstances of various kinds, from the unconscious influence of those who have made up their minds, and from all the innumerable and indescribable things which go to constitute the spirit of the age. The arguments and deliberate influence of the active supporters help, but a large part of their effect is indirect and unperceived at the time.

It is in their influence on the neutral body that the militants are doing most harm to the cause. They are exasperating the large undecided mass, and driving many of them into more or less hardened opinion on the wrong side. And once a man (or woman) has made up his mind, especially perhaps if he has made it up emotionally, it is much harder to move him. Of course the militants are also reducing some active supporters of the movement to lukewarmness, at least about the advisability of immediate advance, and thus losing the influence of such supporters. But I think the harm they are doing with the hitherto more or less neutral is more serious.

However, do not let us talk of the militant policy any more. I, at least, have enough belief in our cause to trust that it can live down that set-back. Feeling on our side is rising, I believe, like a tide, so that a little ditch cut across it will only retard it for a moment.

When I first became aware of the movement—in the late sixties or early seventies—it was in the stage of being met by ridicule. People who were not in favour of it did not generally argue—they laughed. This no doubt kept the timid away, but as a matter of fact very few were interested. An old

friend here was reminding me the other day of a meeting of the Cambridge Suffrage Society held she believes in the early eighties. I do not think I attended it myself, though I am not sure. It was an open meeting, and a lady from London was to address it. The committee did not venture to take any room larger than the Alderman's parlour at the Guildhall. But that was too large. The committee sat at the table near the speaker, and six or eight other ladies came in and were asked to sit close to the committee at the table, so as to look less scattered—and that was all the audience the visitor had to address. And that, according to my friend's general recollection, and my own too, was the usual type of the early meetings organised by the Cambridge Society.

But gradually all this changed—and the degree of change may be measured by comparing with these early meetings those which have taken place at Cambridge in recent years. No one laughs now, or very few. The question is taken seriously even by opponents, and the number of people sufficiently interested to wish to hear about it is very large.

There is another measure of the progress made of which we old people, who have been suffragists for a long time, are conscious. We can see among our own friends and acquaintances people who have been doubtful but have now pronounced themselves in favour of giving women the parliamentary vote. I remember, for instance, a conversation many years ago with a lady who is now an ardent suffragist, but who surprised me then by her doubtful attitude. I see others who 20 or 30 years ago I should have expected to find opposed, now taking a leading part on our side in their own neighbourhoods. I remember another conversation in which a man who was or had been a Member of Parliament—I forget which—was taking part and was expressing great doubts about the advisability or the advantage to themselves of giving votes to women. Some one present said that the increasing tendency to regulate by legislation industrial matters affecting certain classes of women specially, or affecting them differently from men, was an important reason why women should vote. He admitted at once that women ought to have the vote if such legislation were increasing, but he doubted the fact at the

moment. That man is a supporter now. What impresses me is the number of people one knows who are now supporters, and even active supporters, and have become so without one's being able to point to any particular moment when what I may call their conversion took place.

What causes besides active propaganda have contributed to this progress? I think we can point to some. Among them an important place is, I think, to be assigned to the increase of legislative interference in arrangements connected with work and wages of which I have just spoken—to the disappearance for good or ill of the old *laissez faire*. When Parliament tries to legislate about such matters, it becomes very obvious that in certain ways the interests of women and of men are not the same, and are even occasionally opposed—not on the whole, of course, but in certain particulars. And if so it seems also obvious that women should have a voice in the legislation, for it is so clear that within limits we all know better what suits ourselves than others can know for us.

This last consideration is an important principle at the base of democratic government—at least, so long as this does not degenerate into a mere tyranny of the majority—and the extension of the franchise in 1867 and 1884 has, I think, had a very important effect in bringing home to people that the arguments for extending the suffrage in the case of men apply equally to women with the same qualifications. I think we should find that many speeches used in favour of widening the suffrage in 1884 would serve as speeches at a women's suffrage meeting. I used to be impressed with the fact at the time, I remember. Probably we have noticed that the propriety of widows and other women householders having votes when the professed basis of the franchise is household suffrage, occurs of itself to the man in the street—or rather, perhaps, I should say to the man in the country village.

I travelled the other day in a railway carriage filled with a party of women travelling from somewhere beyond Cambridge—I do not know what they were—widows and daughters of rather small tradesmen perhaps. Among other things they talked of among themselves was the suffrage—and very

angry they were with the militants. "But mind you," said one, "I am not altogether against women having votes. I think it only fair that widows with houses should have it." I thought she and her companions belonged clearly to that neutral body of which I spoke just now; some day, when sound suffrage views are put before them, they will come down on the right side of the fence if not previously too much exasperated.

Then, again, as regards educated people at least, I think the large and increasing number of educated women engaged in work useful to the community outside their own homes has had a great effect on the views both of men and women about the vote.

These are three very important influences affecting the general atmosphere in which views are formed—the increased tendency to legislation affecting employments, the spread in all classes and parties of democratic views, the work done by women. And then, last but not least, is the steady work carried on in public and in private by the societies for promoting women's suffrage and their members from the commencement of the movement onwards. Our own society is a young one, but the pioneer societies now merged in the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies have worked hard in times of hope and in times of discouragement for half a century, and their labours have not been in vain. A movement grows like a snowball—the larger the number of its supporters the more rapidly it increases. Progress therefore of late years has been more rapid and more obvious than it used to be, but none the less the possibility of the present progress is largely due to the early efforts of the pioneers.

I think some of my hearers may demur to the view I expressed that the set-back due to militancy is the only serious one from which we have suffered. They may say that, for instance, the repeated attempts and repeated failures to get a bill through Parliament—failures which we cannot of course entirely attribute to the militants—are set-backs. But I do not think failures of this sort are set-backs at all. They are only waves on a rising tide.

If in a rising tide we watch to see when a sand castle will be overwhelmed, we shall see one little wave after another approaching and receding without apparently affecting anything. One wave perhaps will get very near, and yet fail, and perhaps many succeeding waves will get even less near. But the failure of these waves does not set back the tide. That rises steadily all the time and ultimately and inevitably a wave does at length reach and overwhelm the castle.

The analogy fails in one point. These waves that roll up the sandy shore have no real effect on the tide—they are mere ripples on its surface. But wisely conducted assaults on the suffrage citadel—such as attempts to pass bills or resolutions in Parliament—are more than this. They *do* help the tide to rise. The effort is *not* wasted even if it fails at the moment. The tide rises the faster for it. Of course such partial failures are very disappointing at the moment, especially to those who have worked hard to secure success. It is impossible for those who have thrown their whole energies into producing a wave which really will, they think, reach the castle at last, to see it roll back like its predecessors, without a sinking of heart, without a momentary feeling of hopelessness. It is depressing to have to begin again and roll up another wave, all the more because the energy needed to overcome what seems the stupidity of those who disagree with us might, we think, if set free by success be more profitably employed for the good of the world. It is difficult sometimes to keep up courage—for the young especially, for age brings more patience. But it is just because these partial failures are trying that we must restore our sense of proportion by contemplating from time to time the great progress that has been made on the whole, and so get courage for fresh effort.

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